

Where the killing starts

By David Edwards

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The statistics of death in Baghdad are now “beyond shame”, Robert Fisk writes in the Independent. In the first three weeks of July there were 506 violent deaths in Baghdad alone: “Even the Iraqi officials here shake their heads in disbelief”. (Fisk, ‘Baghdad is a city that reeks with the stench of the dead’, The Independent, July 28, 2004 – <http://www.robert-fisk.com/articles423.htm#FullStory>)

Before last year’s invasion, Baghdad’s morgue investigated an average of 20 deaths a month caused by firearms. In June 2003, that number rose to 389 and in August it reached 518. (Jeffrey Fleishman, ‘Baghdad’s Packed Morgue Marks a City’s Descent Into Lawlessness’, Los Angeles Times, September 16, 2003)

Where did all this killing begin? We might think it began with the leaders who issued the orders for the invasion of Iraq, and with the pilots and soldiers who pushed the buttons and pulled the triggers. But in truth the killing always starts with you and us – the public.

First, we have to be persuaded that we are led by good, reasonable people who absolutely would not kill unless they had to. Psychological buffers must be set up in our minds to protect us from the realisation that our leaders are willing to kill cynically – for power, for profit, for the status quo. Because these buffers erode over time, our leaders must be manufactured fresh, smiling and new every few years by the same system of power with the same ruthless goals.

We know all about Bush-I and Thatcher, but things are different now. Now there is Clinton and Blair. And now Bush-II and Blair. And now, perhaps, John Kerry and Gordon Brown. All arrive declaring their determination “to make kinder the face of the nation and gentler the face of the world”, while the same boot continues stamping on the same human face – for ever.

The killing, actually, starts with the surreal emptiness and manufactured optimism of party conferences and conventions. Have you noticed how desolate you feel when you see John Edwards’ fake perma-grin, and when you see John Kerry’s carefully rehearsed salute as he declares, idiotically, “I’m John Kerry and I’m reporting for duty”?

Do you notice how you cringe when you see Kerry pointing into the crowd – a gesture associated with confident authority and power? Do you notice there is something

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nauseating about the empty clichés, about the speeches about nothing, about the cheering about nothing? Isn't it deeply wounding that, after millions of years of history, humanity has arrived at this utterly fraudulent charade as an expression of 'democracy'?

The reason for the desolation, cringing and nausea is that this is where the killing starts. To kill honesty and sincerity, to kill ideas and discussion, to kill meaning, is to kill people.

Paul Krugman writes in the New York Times: "Somewhere along the line, TV news stopped reporting on candidates' policies, and turned instead to trivia that supposedly reveal their personalities. We hear about Mr. Kerry's haircuts, not his health care proposals. We hear about George Bush's brush-cutting, not his environmental policies." (Krugman, 'Triumph of the trivial', The New York Times, July 30, 2004)

Noam Chomsky describes how the choice in the US presidential election is restricted to the "savage extreme of a narrow policy spectrum". It is a choice between two candidates who were born to wealth and political power, who attended the same elite university, and who "are able to run because they are funded by largely the same corporate powers" promoting the same interests.

The campaigns are run by the Public Relations industry, which ensures candidates keep away from real issues: "The public is not unaware of its purposeful marginalisation", Chomsky notes. On the eve of the 2000 election, 75% of the American public regarded it as largely meaningless. (Chomsky, in Merlin Chowkwanyun, "'The Savage Extreme of a Narrow Policy Spectrum' – Five Questions with Noam Chomsky', <http://www.counterpunch.org/merlin07312004.html>, July 31, 2004)

This is where the killing starts – when debate is emptied of reason so that the public is subject to a kind of mass media lobotomy and fundamentally disenfranchised. What is the difference between not being able to vote and not having anything meaningful to vote for? Z Magazine editor, Michael Albert, notes:

"Bush and Kerry's battle for swing voters is actually not even a battle over the informed decisions of those individuals. It is a battle for support from donors and media moguls who provide the means to manipulate swing voters." (Albert, 'Election Hyperbole' www.zmag.org, July 28, 2004)

Electric Speakers

We don't know the names, or even the nationality, of the people who will die when the cruise missiles fly into Sudan, Syria, Iran, or wherever. But fly they will. Someone once observed that cruise missile and nappy factories are similar in one crucial respect – the product has to be used or the factory shuts down.

This future killing began with Jon Snow's excited reporting for Channel 4 News from the

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Democratic convention. Of John Edwards, Snow said: “He is a very electric speaker – he will detonate this place. He really will cause a kind of popular explosion in this hall, there’s no doubt about that.” (Snow, Channel 4 News, July 28, 2004)

Of John Kerry, Snow said: “He was jolly successful in Vietnam.”

According to ITV News’ Libby Wiener, Kerry gave “a commanding performance from the man who hopes to be commander-in-chief”. (ITV 12:30 News, July 30, 2004)

The Guardian’s editors talked of Kerry’s “energising progressive calls”. Kerry’s main task, they noted, was to win the trust of swing voters on issues of physical and economic security: “His speech on Thursday was an impressive pitch for that support... Mr Kerry will not beat Mr Bush by shouting and posturing. He may do so by reasoning and reassuring. If that’s what it takes, then good luck to him.” (Leader, ‘The cautious candidate’, The Guardian, July 31, 2004)

The Guardian’s Martin Kettle congratulated Kerry on “an audacious and intelligent piece of timing from a candidate who has been written off too easily in the past as risk-averse”. (Kettle, ‘The Democrats’ message: don’t get mad, get even’, The Guardian, July 31, 2004)

The Independent’s Rupert Cornwell wrote of how “an unfamiliar, somehow liberated John Kerry was on view. The dispassionate man found passion. He smiled, his sentences were short and emphatic, his message clear, his turn of phrase, on occasion, compelling. At moments, he was almost visionary.”

Cornwell continued: “Whatever your political views, the last night of a convention is an electrifying goose-pimples occasion, more movie than reality...” (Rupert Cornwell, ‘Hawkish yet visionary, Kerry proves compelling’, The Independent, July 31, 2004)

A tiny voice of reason intruded into Cornwell’s electrified state of mind: “On the war against terror and the war in Iraq, the President and his challenger differ on style rather than substance. Parts of Thursday’s speech could have come from Mr Bush.”

The Independent’s editors opined: “John Kerry has handsomely passed another test on the course to the White House. Once again – just as in Vietnam, in his tight Senate re-election race in 1996, and in the primaries this year – the complicated man from Massachusetts delivered when it counted.” (Leader, ‘A speech that made Mr Kerry appear a genuine contender for the crown’, The Independent, July 31, 2004)

Compare this view from one of the country’s two leading ‘liberal’ papers with the view of Michael Albert: “Kerry is a vile warrior happy to defend corporate interests. Bush believes military might produces diplomatic right, offense is everything, and all obstacles and negotiation must be damned.” (Albert, op.,cit)

Isn’t it clear that Albert is fundamentally not ‘on board’, not willing to bury the ugly reality in vacuous journalese? Britain’s liberal media – representing the outer limits of mainstream

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political dissent – fundamentally *are* on board. And they will continue to be on board when the cruise missiles fly. Because this will, once again, be a case of Kerry having “delivered when it counted” – just as in Vietnam, just as in his tight Senate re-election race in 1996, just as in the primaries.

And we, the public, will also be on board when Kerry’s missiles slash into somebody else’s lives, into somebody else’s loves and hopes and fears and future, incinerating some other family – because it ‘had to be done’.

Blogger Kurt Nimmo wrote recently of how Clinton blitzed Baghdad with cruise missiles on June 27, 1993, not long after taking office. Historians tell us Clinton launched the attack in response to an unproven Iraqi assassination plot against former president Bush. But Clinton’s real reason, Nimmo writes, “was to demonstrate to the world he was a tough guy like his predecessor”. As a retiring tough guy, Bush had also blitzed Iraq on January 17 that same year as “a sort of perverse farewell”. (Nimmo, ‘Clinton’s Life: In The Grip Of mass Murder’, July 6, 2004, <http://kurtnimmo.com/blog/index.php?p=226>)

Kerry, recall, voted for the invasion of Iraq – one of the great war crimes of modern times. Last month, Rand Beers, national security adviser to the Kerry campaign, opened a high-level briefing with a warning: “In many ways, the goals of the two administrations are in fact not all that different.” (David Rennie, ‘Kerry “will not change foreign policy”’, The Daily Telegraph, July 29, 2004)

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